

Miss China Ireland 2006

REBECCA CHIYOKO KING-O'RIAIN

As I enter the hall where the first-ever Miss China Ireland beauty pageant will be held, I am struck by a feeling of contradiction. On the one hand, there is the aristocratic feeling of the Royal Dublin Society hall (walls lined with ageing library books), and on the other, the shouts of excitement from the Flower City Lion Dancers who bang undeterred on their drums to encourage the rapid and jerking movements of the Lions themselves. Drummers and dancers shout greetings to each other in their red and yellow satin pantaloons, sweating profusely in 24-degree heat, unseasonably hot by Irish standards, while banners with their dance troop name loft above their heads. The Flower City Lion Dancers are here to drive out the 'bad spirits' with their sounds and bring good luck to all of us and the event, the first of its kind in Ireland. As the cymbals ring out across these hallowed halls for what I assume is the first time on this part of Irish soil, I sense that Ireland may be crossing over into new territory as the Chinese in Ireland come to define themselves, for tonight anyway, outside of the mainly white, Catholic and Irish context in which many of them live. The veneer of the event is a mix of Lion Dancers shadowed by the polypropylene backdrop (made in Shanghai for a fraction of the cost in Ireland) while Riverdance-type instrumental music plays in the

*background as the Lion Dancers rest and the Miss China Ireland pageant begins.*¹

The Miss China Ireland beauty pageant, held for the first time in June 2006, signifies the gathering of the Chinese community to celebrate and define what it means to be Chinese in Ireland through the selection of a beauty queen – Miss China Ireland. The pageant is an example of ethnic collective definition underscored by elements of both cultural hybridity and multiculturalism. This ‘ethnic’ response, I argue, is taking place within the field of popular culture (beauty pageants) in part because the project of multiculturalism in both the Irish state and in civil society has been relatively weak. The pageant represents an interesting case study of the blending of Chinese culture and Irish local context through: the construction of a cultural identity which homogenises many diverse identities into ‘the Chinese in Ireland’; the production of a culturally hybrid symbol (Miss China Ireland); and the cultural context of the Chinese experience in Ireland as seen through universalising narratives of the diaspora. This third factor is expressed in terms of working hard and longing for home, a situation that mirrors the preoccupations of Irish emigrants in the past.² The production and reproduction of such universalising narratives in the pageant resonate with the diasporic history of Irish people and may help to encourage a point of intersection between Irish and Chinese cultures.

¹ Italicised text in this chapter denotes excerpts from the author’s field notes.

² B. Conway, ‘Who do we think we are? Immigration and the discursive construction of national identity in an Irish daily mainstream newspaper, 1996–2004’, *Translocations*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, available at www.dcu.ie/~imrstr/firstissue/conway.shtml (accessed February 2008).

Chinese in Ireland

Many immigrants chose Ireland as a migration destination because of its earning potential during the Celtic Tiger economic 'boom' years.³ However, Chinese immigrants, particularly new arrivals, do not explain their migration to Ireland as motivated solely by better employment prospects. Earlier waves of Chinese migration to Ireland came from Hong Kong and some ethnic Chinese came from Vietnam to open small restaurant and takeaway businesses in the 1980s.⁴ Today, many Chinese in Ireland have come from mainland China in part to study English and to try eventually to gain third-level degrees or other educational qualifications. In this sense they have come to 'target learn' English as an investment in their human capital.⁵ However, they also work part-time and constitute a major part of the labour force in the low-wage service sector in traditional immigrant work environments such as catering, sales and cleaning services.

In 2006 the Irish Census enumerated its population in 'ethnic' terms for the first time. The Census gives some perspective on the growing ethnic population in Ireland and its impacts on Irish society. It found that 95 per cent of the usually resident population described themselves as 'white' and constituted the largest group in Ireland. Asian/Asian-Irish were the second largest group at 1.3 per cent of the population, with the Chinese representing 16,500 or 0.4 per cent of the total population. However, there has been

³ See, for example, I. Grabowska, 'Changes in the international mobility of labour: Job migration of Polish nationals in Ireland', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2005, pp. 27–44.

⁴ For more on the Vietnamese in Ireland, see M. Maguire, *Differently Irish: A Cultural History Exploring 25 Years of Vietnamese–Irish Identity*, Dublin, Woodfield Press, 2004. For more on immigration and Ireland, see S. Garner, *Racism in the Irish Experience*, London: Pluto Press, 2004.

⁵ Y. Y. Wang, *Chinese Students in Ireland*, Dublin: National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, 2006.

concern that this number represents a serious undercount of Chinese people in Ireland. For example, in 2005 the Garda National Immigration Bureau issued 14,597 visas to Chinese students, although this figure was down from the 13,112 (renewals) and 1,485 (new) visas totalling 15,933 for 2004.⁶

The Chinese are seen as a powerful economic force, not just as workers contributing to the economy, but also as consumers. There are websites, for example Irelandbbs.com, which contain information about housing, studying English, jobs, personals and fashion; and magazines such as *Tiao Wang* (started by an Irish entrepreneur), which claims to be the first Irish magazine aimed at the Chinese community. There are also intracommunity Chinese newspapers which are locally (*Newsxpress*, *Shining Emerald* and *New Chinese*) and internationally (*Epoch Times*) produced and which cover Chinese popular cultural entertainment, foreign affairs and news about China. These newspapers also advertise business schools, English language schools and personal services. Irish universities also see Chinese students as potential 'streams of revenue' in the face of a projected demographic downturn in the number of Irish applicants to third-level educational institutions.

The Chinese in Ireland are a diverse, complex and large ethnic group and yet little is known about them. Generational, ethnic, national and linguistic differences have often been overlooked and the Chinese in Ireland have been analysed mostly in relation to their economic contributions (both as workers and consumers) in Irish society. Recently, however, more attention has been paid to early and more settled Chinese immigrants in Ireland, who typically came from Hong Kong (sometimes through England) to Ireland to set up small takeaway and restaurant businesses. Nicola Yau, for example, provides a

⁶ Personal communication with Garda National Immigration Bureau, 7 October 2005.

strong analysis of the struggles of second-generation Chinese in Ireland and found that 'participants identified as Irish to a certain extent and more often than not because they felt it was their national identity. However, they were racialised as Other. The Irish label equated with white and the uncertainty of accepting an Irish identity was further communicated'.⁷

Even though second-generation Chinese are Irish-born Chinese (IBC), they still are limited in their abilities to claim 'Irishness' because of race. Their racialisation as 'other' has limited the ability of the Chinese community to claim diverse (including Irish) identities, in part because they are homogenised by mainstream Irish society. Because they 'all look alike' racially, they are assumed to be homogeneous culturally, linguistically and ethnically. However, the earlier immigrants, IBCs and more recently arrived 'students' from mainland China who are younger, single, with varying levels of English and who work primarily in low-wage service jobs, are very different to each other.⁸ But once in Ireland, these diverse groups have formed a sense of community that is created within the Irish context as a minority group, as part of the Chinese diaspora and as a hybrid of both traditional notions of Chinese culture and modern global influences. This melange of representations is brought into sharp relief in the Miss China Ireland pageant.

The pageant

Beauty pageants are cultural forms that allow us to understand the creation and re-creation of racial/ethnic collective symbolism and identities within a public cultural

⁷ N. Yau, 'Celtic Tiger, hidden dragon: Exploring identity among second generation Chinese in Ireland', *Translocations*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, p. 16, available at www.translocations.ie/currentissue/volume1issue2-4.htm (accessed February 2008).

⁸ Wang, *op. cit.*

sphere.⁹ 'By choosing an individual whose deportment, appearance and style embodies the values and goals of a nation, locality or group, beauty contests expose these same values and goals to interpretation and challenge.'¹⁰ Miss China Ireland is a symbolic representation of the ethnic Chinese community. Her 'cultural production' also allows the community to debate and ultimately determine what it means to be Chinese in Ireland. The dialogic nature of this social construction of identity can be seen throughout the pageant.

About 500 people crammed into the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) for the Miss China Ireland 2006 pageant at which the eighteen finalists chosen from the thirty-eight original candidates would appear on stage.¹¹ Scheduled to start at 7.30 p.m. the pageant lasted almost five hours ending close to midnight. The contestants were described in the pageant programme as being chosen because they had a 'high standard in talent, education or beauty'. The pageant advertisements promised to award the titles of Miss China Ireland, Miss Talent and Miss Popular, with the winners going forward to represent Ireland's Chinese community (first and second winners) in the European Miss China regional finals later in the year. The pyramidal nature of the contest means that it is engaging in both a localising (within Ireland) and a globalising (Miss China Europe, Miss China World) of Chinese identity.

The stated goal of the pageant was to help those less fortunate within the Chinese community in Ireland, without asking for assistance from the Irish government (as most Chinese students are not eligible for health, education or

⁹ R. C. King-O'Riain, *Pure Beauty: Judging Race in Japanese American Beauty Pageants*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

¹⁰ C. B. Cohen, R. Wilk and B. Stoeltje, *Beauty Queens on the Global Stage: Gender, Contests and Power*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 2.

¹¹ In 2007 the Miss China Ireland pageant was held in the National Concert Hall to accommodate a larger audience of over 1,000 people (24 June 2007).

other social welfare benefits) or seeking aid from the Chinese embassy. The income generated from the event was donated to the 'Chinese Student Urgent Fund' to help Chinese students who, because of extenuating circumstances, had a pressing financial need. Many of those in the audience were Chinese students. The pageant therefore sought to create ethnic solidarity in the face of adversity (itself a critique of the failed state project of integration) rather than necessarily focusing on mainstreaming the Chinese within the wider Irish community or promoting multiculturalism within Irish civil society.

The programme described the pageant as 'A Chinese culture event organized by the Chinese Information Service Centre, which has organized several major Chinese Cultural events in the past three years'. Master of Ceremonies Hugo Tian was flown in from Paris and paired with Lucy Liu, a postgraduate student from University College Dublin, to host the event. They were backed by a professional disc jockey and both recorded and live music.

The judges were bilingually (in Mandarin and English) introduced by Lucy Liu and the jury consisted of: Miss China Europe, a representative of Phoenix TV,¹² John Finucane the principal clarinettist in the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, a representative of the Chinese Business Association of Northern Ireland, the Director of the Irish Chinese Information Centre, the owner of the New Millennium Restaurant who is also a major sponsor of the event, a representative of the Chinese Students and Scholars Organisation, a former Miss China Ireland, Lin Liu of local Chinese newspaper *Newsxpress*, Oliver Wong from Chinatown Radio, and the Chairman of the Ireland–Fu Jian (southeastern China) Association. The composition of the judging panel represented an attempt to integrate disparate factions within the 'Chinese community' –

¹² Phoenix TV provided coverage of the Regional Miss China Europe pageant in Germany in August; Phoenix TV and Sky TV covered the finals in China in September.

consisting of business people and students, community-based organisations and corporations reaching out to Chinese consumers, Chinese, as well as Irish-owned companies and the Chinese in Northern Ireland. The carefully selected panel reflected the diverse interests within the Chinese community and attempted to blend them together and have them agree (if only for a few moments) on what it might mean to be Chinese in Ireland.

Synthesised Chinese music signals the first segment of the pageant:

As the women ooze out onto the stage waving large fans in front of their faces, it is clear that the choreography of the 'opening' number is meant to preview each of the contestants. They criss-cross each other in intersecting lines, all wearing matching traditional Chinese red dresses in groups of four. They move to the front of the stage and are 'introduced' to the audience. Already people are marking their ballots (the end of the ticket stubs) for their 'vote' for Miss Popularity.

In the programme there is a small 'headshot' photo of each woman (some photos are very amateurish – others clearly professionally taken) accompanied by her name, height and measurements, and age. No hometown is listed, but it is the first thing that each woman mentions when she comes to the microphone to do her introduction and cheers go up from the audience for local towns such as Shenyang, Shanghai and Fu Jian. There seem to be many participants from Fu Jian in the pageant and their friends and relatives seem to be active members in organising the pageant. The Fu Jian Association sponsors events within the community and there is a high level of solidarity in the Fu Jian sub-community in Ireland. I am struck by the fact that there is a contestant from Mongolia and one that doesn't seem to speak Mandarin, but perhaps Cantonese?¹³

¹³ Thanks to Ying Yun Wang for this insight and for her simultaneous translation during my pageant fieldwork in 2007.

The heterogeneous identities portrayed in the pageant are being glossed over for the purposes of producing one 'queen' that will represent many. Mongolian, Cantonese and Fujianese are blurring together. English is deployed as a levelling device to minimise the significant linguistic and ethnic differences among the contestants.

Culturally hybrid productions

The entertainment on offer embraces a range of cultures.

Louie, dressed all in black and sweating profusely into his slicked-back hair performs a hip-hop musical number for us. He steps up to the microphone and entertains us, backed by two Chinese female dancers with tattoos and white go-go boots doing an up-tempo hip-hop number in Mandarin. He is dynamic and trying to 'wind up' the crowd and get them into it by shouting 'hello Dublin!'. He introduces the first (and perhaps most popular?) event which is Swimwear. The contestants stride onto the stage (in groups of six or so) in high heels, with their hair down or in ponytails, wearing two-piece swimsuits. There is no 'fake tan' here and I am wondering again if Chinese bodily beauty is the same as in Ireland.

We are entertained while the contestants change for the next pageant segment by 'Rua' – a musical duo of two Irish girls both with red (rua) hair playing traditional-ish Irish music on the fiddle and singing. They sing mostly in Irish and English to a predominantly Chinese audience and seem to have almost no Mandarin themselves beyond the superficial 'ni hao' when they open their act. They are clearly 'the Irish' cultural element, carefully chosen to be integrated into the predominantly Chinese programme.

The contestants also display their talents, which consist of piano playing, singing, Chinese and other forms of dance, magic tricks, hula, violin and the more unusual, and

perhaps difficult to perform on stage, landscape painting with cotton balls, calligraphy and massage techniques.

One contestant performed an Indian dance which the crowd liked and with which they clapped along. I am amazed by the flexibility of the crowd and their cosmopolitan appreciation of Rua, traditional Irish music, traditional Chinese Lion Dancing, DJ hip-hop music and Indian dancing all in the span of just two hours. The musical sections of the pageant and talent demonstrations combined many cultural elements: both traditional (Chinese folk dance) and modern (hip-hop); both global (Indian dance and hula) and local (Irish music); both Western (bathing suits/evening gowns) and Eastern (Qi Pao – the traditional Chinese red dresses) in a seamless melange of cultural representation.

The pageant represents a field of intercultural and multicultural production which is organically generated through the pageant practices themselves. The cultural elements of the performances give meaning to the identities being confirmed through the process of the pageant. It is organised by the Chinese diaspora in Ireland, in stark contrast to state projects, such as Dublin City Council's 'Chinese New Year' celebration in Smithfield, which are more formal, generally imposed from above and contrived rather than organically driven from within the Chinese community.

The speech: Cultural narratives of 'home', 'work' and 'values'

Each contestant gives a short speech during which many share their 'motto' with the audience and give insight into the Chinese-Irish experience. The first contestant says her motto is 'Always on the road, always in a dream' and the reference to travel, being far from home and longing for home is given from the outset. She then picks a question out of the hat and answers it. I notice that one judge has to translate what she is saying into English for the Irish judge and for the judge from Phoenix TV. While this contestant is

Chinese, she does not speak Mandarin. The next contestant is asked 'What is your biggest advantage?' and answers in English that her biggest asset is that she knows about both cultures – Chinese and Irish. Even though she is Cantonese-speaking, English is the default language which she uses. A positive message of transnationalism is proffered as the reason behind migration to Ireland.

When asked what is most important in life, contestants' answers range from 'achieve success in life' to 'pursuing happiness and self-worth'. Many also mention family and the distance they are from them. One explains how she is 'brave' and the first in her family to go abroad. Contestant number 7 is asked 'What is the purpose of coming to this place [Ireland]?' and explains that the experience will help her later in life, but she does not deny that it is difficult at times. When contestant number 8 is asked a similar question, she responds that the greatest regret for her is that she comes from a single-parent family and is so far away from home. She testifies that she is going to work hard in Ireland to thank her mother for her love and support. This elicits a loud clap from the audience and its Irish contingent presumably for her 'filial piety' (respect for elders), her determination to work hard (at low wages?), her longing for home and her family cultural values. The resonance with the Irish emigrant experience is clear. The narratives produced in the Miss China Ireland pageant echo the narratives of young women of the Irish diaspora who participate in the Rose of Tralee pageant every year. As such, they are familiar to Irish audiences.

Contestant number 9 is asked 'How has Irish culture affected you?' and answers by saying that she wants to say 'I love you Irish people'. Contestant 13 is asked 'Which is more important beauty or career?' and cleverly evades the question to respond that family is most important and that the mother is the core of the family and hers is the greatest person in the world. The narrative appropriates the far-away mother and places her at the heart of the family and culture. When contestant number 15 is asked a similar

question, she responds 'Beauty doesn't last, so it is better to be beautiful inside'.

The final contestant is asked 'What is the difference between those living in Ireland longer and those who are more recent arrivals?' and answers in a somewhat impolitic fashion that the newer arrivals work harder. That she has struck a negative note with those in the audience of older stock is clear when they emit an audible gasp. The sponsors, VIPs and many of the judges fall into the category of 'those who have lived here longer'. They and the 'new arrivals' need each other as there would be no pageant without the participation of younger (female) students from mainland China and no sponsors without the more established Chinese-Irish community. However, they are not necessarily two communities that have a natural affinity, except in instances of adversity, when they coalesce under the banner of the Chinese in Ireland. The duration of their time in Ireland creates a cleavage not only in Ireland, but also in their different relationships with the homeland, China. Those who stay away longer are less tied to China and, in some instances, less Chinese.

It is 11.15 p.m. when the winners are revealed. Miss Talent and Miss Popularity are announced first, followed by the runners up and then, finally, Lilin Han is crowned the first Miss China Ireland.

Miss China Ireland

The Miss China Ireland pageant is a quintessential example of a diasporic collective identity at work as it incorporates multiple loyalties and attachments that are integral to processes of international migration.¹⁴ The beauty queen is both a local representative of the Chinese in Ireland as well

¹⁴ See D. Abdelhady, 'Beyond home/host networks: Forms of solidarity among Lebanese immigrants in a global era', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, pp. 427-453; J. E. Braziel and A. Mannur, *Theorizing Diaspora*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

as a representative of Ireland's Chinese community to the regional Miss China Europe (and world) contests. She is also a representative of what it means to be Chinese in Ireland to wider Irish society and indeed may even evoke resonances of the Irish diasporic experience for many Irish people. She is a representative of the Chinese diaspora living in Ireland and as such can be seen as a possible hybrid of the two places, spaces and cultures.¹⁵ Miss China Ireland represents a possible hybrid of elements of home (China) and away (Ireland) and some new Chinese–Irish elements of culture, experience and identity.¹⁶

The Miss China Ireland beauty pageant is an example of the recognition of 'otherness' by those who share commonalities but who are united most by their exclusion and marginalisation in their new location in Ireland. This process of self-definition produces a symbol (Miss China Ireland) which works to create homogeneity within the group (which varies by gender, education, class, region of the country, visa status, generation etc.), shared cultural and linguistic symbols and shared experiences in the 'host' country. This is not unfamiliar to Chinese diasporic members as the 'state legitimisation of sustained practices of dual anchoredness or dual allegiance' explicitly construes Chinese migration as a patriotic act; in so doing, the Chinese people understand and value the promotion of migration to places such as Ireland while being simultaneously pulled back by the 'the imaginaries of "home"' through cultural events like the Miss China Ireland pageant.¹⁷

¹⁵ V. S. Kalra, R. Kaur and J. Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity*, London: Sage, 2005.

¹⁶ L. Siu, 'Queen of the Chinese colony: Gender, nation, and belonging in diaspora', *Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2005, pp. 511–542.

¹⁷ P. Nyiri, 'Expatriating is patriotic? The discourse on the 'new migrants' in the People's Republic of China and identity construction among recent immigrants from the PRC', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 635–653, October 2001, p. 635.

The Miss China Ireland beauty pageant illustrates the values, hopes and experiences of the Chinese in Ireland. It also constitutes a community in dialogue with itself about the struggles that many Chinese face outside of that community. Their position as ‘other’ within Irish society causes them to look to each other and home for solidarity and affirmation, rather than to the Irish state or to other racial/ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The Miss China Ireland pageant is primarily run by and for the Chinese in Ireland. While the pageant takes place outside the view of mainstream society, it is an example of Ireland’s ethnic minority communities working to define themselves through the construction of symbolic identities. The pageant clearly integrates Irish cultural elements (Irish music and musicians) and beauty pageant narratives but on Chinese terms and into a Chinese-dominated sphere. The pageant’s presenters and contestants speak in English, but only when it suits their own purposes (i.e. when the Cantonese-speaking contestant does not understand Mandarin) and not to cater to the small non-Chinese audience present.

Miss China Ireland illustrates a hybrid blend of Chinese diasporic culture and Irish local context through:

- Cultural identity construction – this can be seen through the homogenisation of diverse identities under the rubric ‘Chinese in Ireland’. Miss China Ireland represents them all and, in so doing, brings them together across language differences, regional differences and generational differences.
- Cultural production – the pageant embodies a hybrid, but limited notion of diasporic culture; blending hip-hop seamlessly with traditional Chinese music, dress and values (filial piety, family).

- Universalising diasporic narratives – the pageant presents Chinese diasporic narratives such as coming to Ireland ‘to work hard’, the contradictions of ‘home and away’, and family values as a universal narrative of the diasporic experience which resonates with Irish diasporic history and Irish audiences.

This account of the first Miss China Ireland beauty pageant illustrates the process of collective self-identity of a racial/ethnic minority group in Ireland. The pageant highlights the struggles that Chinese students have (the reason for the fundraiser) but it also offers the Chinese in Ireland a forum in which to come together collectively to define and negotiate what it means to be Chinese in Ireland. For some, that means speaking a dialect they do not normally speak or having contact with those with whom they would not mix at home. For others, it means bridging generational, ethnic, national and cultural gaps as they grapple to define who they will be within the Chinese diaspora, within Irish society and within their own Chinese–Irish communities.